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# The Library Improving Life for Older Adults

Maricela Corvo de Armas

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## ABSTRACT

This article discusses aging in Cuban society and the role of public libraries in this sphere. Research performed at the Municipal Library of San Antonio de los Baños shows how it is possible for libraries to contribute positively to the quality of life of older adults, in terms of both physical and mental health. A multistage study involving a questionnaire ( $N=200$  elders), interviews ( $N=83$ ), recruitment to a library program ( $N=18$ ), and follow-up interviews demonstrated improvements in the lives of the participants in the library program. These improvements overcame challenges that were found in the lives of the total number of study participants. Study findings indicate that elders integrated into society maintain a more positive outlook as compared to those who do not participate actively in society, and the library performs a key role in bringing about positive outcomes for older adults.

## INTRODUCTION

Demographic aging is a subject that receives significant attention in Cuban society today. The country has been going through a difficult period over the past few years, in part due to changes in the proportion of age groups in the population over the last sixty years. "According to Cuba's 2012 Population and Dwelling Census, persons age 60 or older represent 18.3% of the total population" (Colectivo de Autores 2016, 1) and it is estimated that by 2025 this figure will be 25%. Cuba will have the oldest population in Latin American, which makes it urgent to focus more attention on the needs of an increasingly large population of advanced age.

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In Cuba, health care is a human right and is understood as one of the key elements in national strategy. Group homes for persons 60 and older were first established in Cuba in the 1970s. Casas de abuelos (houses for grandparents) were created, daytime places where older adults get attention and socialization while the families they live with are at work. Hogares de Ancianos (old people's homes) multiplied, where older adults live who do not have family or other caregivers they can live with. Hogares de Impedidos (homes for disabled) were like these, but specifically for older adults with disabilities. Today Cuba has 240 Casas de Abuelos, 136 Hogares de ancianos, and 31 Hogares de Impedidos.

In 1974, the first Comprehensive Program for Older Adult Care was established. Among its purposes was progress in geriatrics, and in 1995 the Older Adult Care Program was implemented. It is fundamentally based on primary care in the community and in health-care institutions. Health promotion, prevention, and education came to be seen as uniquely important for healthy aging.

Regarding community care, we must highlight the Family Physician and Nurse Program that caters to a small population in pre-established geographical areas and can thus integrate and coordinate activities toward people's health. Older adults receive special attention here. Integrated rehabilitation service has increased and strengthened all services and led to advances in home rehabilitation services.

Any human being goes through different stages in life. This is natural, an unavoidable evolution. For this reason, it is appropriate to know and prepare oneself for the specifics of each stage. The art of living must be acquired, in addition to "an aptitude for understanding oneself and the place one occupies in life in all of its developmental stages. However, this ability does not appear spontaneously in man. It must be learned. One must learn to be young, learn to become a mature person, learn to be old" (Tolstoi 1989, 54).

Therefore, it is the responsibility of the health-care sector and of society as a whole to come to terms with an aging society. It is possible to accomplish this by creating public policies, programs, and processes for health promotion, disease prevention, and health-care education. Public libraries play an important role in this. Since the triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, steps have been taken to raise the cultural and educational level of the population as a whole. This began in 1961 with the Literacy Campaign. From the capital to the most remote locations on the island, the project grew and was able to eradicate illiteracy and achieve qualitatively significant progress in the population. In these social transformations, libraries have a starring role. In Cuba today, there are 397 public libraries. They provide quick access to information, promote books and reading, and develop strategies and programs for various age

groups in the community. This demonstrates their active stance in human development and the wellbeing of people in all stages of life. The care of older adults is one of the types of work prioritized in all public libraries in the country.

To ensure these efforts of the public libraries are as successful as possible, rigorous, multidimensional analysis of their processes and outcomes is needed. It is not just a question of achieving longer life spans but achieving them with the appropriate quality of life. So it is important to determine which factors may contribute to the reaching of this goal and which do not. It is necessary to coordinate our individual and collective efforts to raise awareness of this opportunity and demonstrate how a library enhances the quality of life for seniors.

### HISTORICAL AND THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

A brief review of the beginnings of society brings to light that in the early stages, human groups were characterized by a low number of elders among their members. The overriding focus on survival under precarious conditions, the inability of weak members to protect themselves from illnesses, and environmental dangers in hostile surroundings made it almost impossible to attain old age. These conditions combined with the scarcity of food resulted in the abandonment of elders and frail children and sometimes even the practice of sacrificing them. But then agriculture emerged: "When man learned to create and use fire, the situation of children and the elderly improved. This resulted in the development of the first social division of labor (based on sex and age), according to which it corresponded to men to obtain food and to women, together with children and the elderly, to care for the fire" (Tolstoi 1989, 48).

So, population is not an abstract concept, or something unchanged over the course of time. It is social and historical. The average human lifespan has depended upon social conditions. Thus Kursanov writes:

In the Stone and Bronze Ages the average lifespan did not exceed 18 years. In the Roman Empire, it increased to 25 years. By the middle of the 19th century, it had become 34 years, and now it is 50 to 60 years, although in economically undeveloped countries, people live half and even less than half as long as people in developed countries. (1974, 60)

In those developed countries, the human life span has now reached approximately 80 years.

The relatively low number of elders over such a long time span is therefore understandable. This reflects, as stated above, the degree to which they were a liability to their societies, and yet they were also assets due to their having accumulated the most experiences. They were a valuable and exceptional source of information and wisdom, and, as such, critical for intergenerational cultural transmission, particularly, but not only, in oral societies.

*Genetics and Increases in Longevity*

According to UNESCO:

Each individual has a characteristic genetic make-up. Nevertheless, a person's identity should not be reduced to genetic characteristics, since it involves complex educational, environmental and personal factors and emotional, social, spiritual and cultural bonds with others and implies a dimension of freedom. (2003, 7)

Although it has been proven that human genetics does not predetermine life expectancy, it is also true that genetic information is uniquely important as it may indicate the life expectancy predispositions of individuals. Genetics may also highlight characteristics that individuals share as members of social groups. Ángel Augier (born Gibara, Cuba, 1910; died Havana, 2010), a winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature, was one of the most long-lived and important intellectuals in contemporary Latin America and in the world. As he told a reporter from *Granma*, "I have not done anything extraordinary to reach the age of 95. It seems to be a genetic predisposition. My close family members lived a long time" (Hoz 2006).

Dr. Zurina Lestayoy O'Farrill, second-level neurologist at the Institute of Neurology and Neurosurgery of the City of Havana, explained in an interview with the author that

when a person carries a genetic illness, whether inherited or due to changes in a person's DNA, it may involve associated complications that may even be fatal. In addition, some genetic disorders such as degenerative illnesses (especially metabolic ones such as diabetes mellitus, hyper- or hypothyroidism) involve progressively worsening disabilities. While some of these allow an individual to reach an advanced age, he or she must face a life that is more challenging, with the need to rise above the physical, intellectual, sensory, and other problems that accompany genetic illnesses. (Z. Lestayoy O'Farrill, pers. comm.)

Although an illness may be progressive, it is possible to increase the probability of increased longevity and improve quality of life. This can be done, for example, by developing or inspiring motivation in these patients, seeking to place them in work environments appropriate to their abilities, incorporating them into society, generally supporting their participation in their family environment, developing their reading habits, and supporting their participation in and enjoyment of cultural activities and physical exercise. According to Dr. Lestayoy, "If an individual does not carry one of these genetic illnesses, he has a better chance for an increased life span with good quality of life, as long as he develops, over time, a healthy lifestyle, free of stress, with physical exercise, good nutrition, and so on" (Z. Lestayoy O'Farrill, pers. comm.).

Thus we have the important initiative to create a national network of genetic medicine centers in the 169 municipalities and fourteen provinces of the country: to "offer better guarantees of the health and happiness of

the Cuban family,” as medical doctor Beatriz Marcheco Teruel, Director of the National Center for Genetic Medicine, put it in her speech opening the First International Conference on Community Genetics (Universidad para Todos 2005a, 3).

*The 120 Years Club: A Way of Life*

Over the course of history, men have had dreams, aspirations for the improvement of the circumstances of their lives, some of them possible, and many others unattainable. One type of these are the descriptions of utopias in the history of social thought. But while perfection in the abstract does not exist, a human being must always strive for the highest possible goals.

In twenty-first-century Cuba, Eugenio Selman-Housein (1930–2015), PhD in medical sciences and Meritorious Professor of the University of Havana, who was involved in clinical practice and teaching at Calixto García University General Hospital for more than fifty years and who was president of the Caribbean Medical Association, proposed a new and hopeful utopia along these lines. This utopia, the “120 Years Club”—now a reality—has the noble and daring purpose of people reaching that age and living in a way that is qualitatively satisfactory. A recently created nongovernmental organization, it brings together more than five thousand people of all ages, with members of the female sex constituting the majority and the most enthusiastic part of the membership. The organization facilitates activities based in workplaces and apartment buildings, and its purpose is to educate and raise awareness. Public libraries play a very active role in this work.

According to Selman-Housein, the possibility of reaching the age of 120 or more is based on empirical research in various countries regarding longevity. The study of the origin and evolutionary development of our species confirms this. We now know that a person can live to be 120 years old. This idea has also been established theoretically, arguing that all animals are able to live five times longer than the time needed to reach the end of their growth. For example, if humans continue to grow through the age of 24 years (some say until 25, others say 21), we multiply this figure by five and we obtain the result of 120 years (Pupo 2004, 68).

For Selman-Housein, the main factors influencing longevity include health, genetics, culture, dietary habits, physical habits, motivation, and the environment. These should be taken into account from the early stages of life rather than only aiming to repair damage after it has occurred. One example is the smoker at age 50 who finally comprehends how harmful this habit is and decides to quit only after his health is damaged, sometimes irreversibly.

Elders who have surpassed the age of 120 have been identified in Europe, Japan, and other places, but they are exceptions. In Cuba, we have no confirmation of such elders. But today “approximately 2,500 centenar-

ians live in Cuba. Of this number, 70% are female. The majority enjoy adequate nutrition, and 8 of them live alone, which indicates that they still enjoy significant vitality" (Pupo 2004, 69). Meanwhile, new groups have formed in the provinces and People's Councils and are awaiting inclusion in the club, encouraging its ideals. (People's Councils are a subdivision of a municipality in both urban and rural areas.) As Norges Martínez stated at a 2004 press conference of Dr. Enrique Vegas García, executive secretary of the 120 Years Club, "Promoting initiatives which contribute to the satisfactory longevity of the members of the Club is something which extends to the people in the communities where they live" (Martínez 2004, 9).

#### *The Environment*

The environment is a dynamic system in which ecological, socioeconomic, and cultural interrelationships evolve historically as society progresses. It encompasses nature, society, historical and cultural patrimony, as well as other elements. This idea must not be too closely linked to nature, because it is important to understand the interdependence that exists between human action and the natural and social processes used to satisfy material, spiritual, and cultural needs. All processes of growth and economic, social, and technological development cause "complex environmental difficulties which present themselves in the form of soil, water, and air pollution, and in the depletion of natural and historical-cultural resources" (Universidad para Todos 2005b, 3).

In our country, it is essential to keep close watch on the health of cities, eliminating sewage basins, garbage dumps, the wasting of water, and intolerable levels of noise. This is because it is never pointless to emphasize the need to integrate environmental conditions with the objectives of economic development, to maintain the essential balance between environment and society. If this balance is not adequately maintained, it may affect health, including the longevity of the community, particularly the life spans of its most vulnerable populations, such as children and older adults.

#### SAN ANTONIO DE LOS BAÑOS AND ITS LIBRARY

The municipality of San Antonio de los Baños was founded on September 22, 1794. Currently it extends over 126 square kilometers and has 49,855 inhabitants. It is one of the eleven municipalities in Artemisa Province, located about 26 kilometers from the country's capital.

Its people are called *ariguanabenses*, and the name takes its origin from the Ariguanabo River, which has both its source and its terminus within the municipality. The name was given by the indigenous Cuban population, and in their language the name means "river of the palm tree." The waters from this river became famous because the wealthy classes of Havana believed that the waters possessed medicinal and even miraculous

properties. This resulted in the city being called San Antonio de los Baños, Saint Anthony of the Baths.

This fertile plain produces high-quality tobacco, which supplies a significant portion of the country's production of Havana cigars. Because of the river and the forest that surrounds and shades it, it has been declared a restricted area, thus protecting the local Cuban flora and fauna. Tobacco, flowers, culture, and proximity to the capital are all important aspects of the regional identity of San Antonio de los Baños.

The municipality runs a sociocultural development program through institutions such as the Municipal Museum, the International Humor Museum, the House of Culture, the Municipal Library, the Provincial Center of Visual Arts, the Ariguanabo radio station, and a vocational art school. The International School of Film and Television is particularly significant. It was founded in 1986 to train specialists in the various aspects of what is called the Seventh Art in Spanish and French discourse—in other words, cinema.

Humor is characteristic of San Antonio de los Baños. The area has a rich tradition of popular humor and, since the start of the twentieth century, has been home to several humor publications. It is also home to two important Cuban caricaturists, Eduardo Abela and René de la Nuez, as well as many others, and the city has consequently been the site of the International Biennial of Graphic Humor since 1979.

The Municipal Library of San Antonio de los Baños was founded on January 15, 1975. Its bibliographic holdings include 32,324 books, and 1,322 people have library cards. The library has sixteen employees and is open from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday. The average number of daily users is 52.

The institution is a pillar of the community, satisfying the developmental and informational needs of its community by means of activities, its cultural resources, and extension (outside the library) activities with different age groups. Among these are story times at schools and *Círculos Infantiles* (Children's Circles, a sort of enriched day care program for 0-6 years), discussions and book promotions in workplaces and educational settings, and more.

At the *Hogar Materno* (Maternal Home, a residence for expectant mothers with difficult pregnancies), mothers-to-be can discuss issues related to pregnancy, learn about baby care, breastfeeding, and such. At the Grandparents' House (as above), the library hosts conversations about how to enjoy a healthy and happy old age, promotes books, and organizes memory-protecting exercises sessions. The library is also active in prisons and nearby small villages, displaying and promoting books and encouraging reading. A significant amount of work is dedicated to older adults, the visually impaired, and people with disabilities.

The library also carries out research and cultural projects with children,

adolescents, young adults, and older adults on important topics such as stewardship of the environment; understanding local history; and the prevention of drug addiction, alcoholism, and sexually transmitted diseases. The library promotes reading and quality of life for seniors. And the list goes on.

This shows how information professionals are ever more closely involved in all stages of the lives of community members, extending their influence beyond the specific context of librarianship. This is justified when one considers the systematic approach with proven benefits that is offered through the interaction of information organizations with their communities. This library is exceptional in this respect and has represented the country in several IFLA Congresses: Argentina (2004), South Korea (2006), Canada (2008), Sweden (2010), Puerto Rico (2011), France (2014), United States (2016), and Poland (2017), as well as at the ALA Conference in Toronto (2003).

## METHODS

The literature on the health of older adults describes the positive effects of social integration. Some of the more interesting findings are as follows:

- A positive state of mind is defined primarily by good health, along with quality of life, family relationships, cultural opportunities, and group social activities.
- Social inclusion enriches the interpersonal relationships that are so necessary for seniors, and social inclusion may contribute to the prevention of depression that is typical of this stage of life.
- Emotion is an effective means of communication for the individual in a social environment, and it plays a very important role in his or her state of mind or mood.
- A positive state of mind may produce healthy changes in the body. Laughter eliminates the immunosuppressive effect of negative emotions. This is a way to improve health that costs nothing and benefits those who receive it.
- Finally, we can affirm that in addition to adequate nutrition, a lack of addictions, regular exercise, and the ability to participate in cultural activities are fundamental for our psychosocial and mental health. For this reason, persons for whom these conditions are met enjoy a healthy and happy old age.

The methods used were both theoretical (historical-logical, analysis-synthesis, inductive-deductive) and empirical (scientific observation, questionnaires, interviews, experimentation, document analysis). I worked with Dr. Janet Seoane, a family physician in the medical office near the library, to determine the number of older adults more than 60 years of age who were living in the area surrounding the library, to carry out this study



and learn about their health status and their level of social integration and thus contribute to their quality of life.

I visited the statistics office of the municipality of San Antonio de los Baños to learn the number of older adults living in the part of the central city near the library. I obtained the number of 1,023 people age 60 or older. I then randomly surveyed 200 older adults in parks, stores, and markets or as they walked through the city center and environs. The survey concerned their health, social integration, and quality of life. Of the 1,023 persons, I also conducted 83 interviews. Information from Dr. Seoane enabled me to learn about their lifestyles and to promote the library's older-adult programs, with the goal of them joining. Eighteen people did join. I did follow-up interviews with all 18 to keep them coming and learn the program's effect on their health.

### DATA AND ANALYSIS

The surveys revealed that a majority of the sample of 200 people had some health challenges, were sad, were frequently depressed or generally unmotivated, and did not take part in group social activities. Fair health was typically due to vision or walking difficulties. Poor health was typically due to heart disease, disabilities, bronchial asthma, diabetes, or high blood pressure. Several people mentioned that when they attend various activities, they forget their problems and feel better. Selected survey results are presented in table 1.

After this analysis, I performed a study of the senior adult residents in the area close to the library. I visited the 63 households where the 83 people live, and I observed that many of them were sad and depressed. I interviewed them to learn their health status, whether they exercised, and whether they attended cultural activities. I also asked whether they were signed up at the library, and I asked why they were depressed. Some stated that they were very old and unwell, and that nothing motivated them. Others presented heart problems, high blood pressure, diabetes, arthritis, and vision problems. I confirmed that only 5 (6%) exercised as part of the Grandparents' Circles, 8 people (9%) participated in cultural activities, and 4 (5%) were signed up at the library. The remainder (66 people, 79%) stated that because they had physical ailments and were depressed, they did not participate in those activities.

I spoke to them about the importance of exercising and participating in group social activities in order to improve their physical and mental health. Over thirty days, I visited their homes several times, and I was able to sign up 18 of these people (21%) for the Grandparents' Circle at the Library. This group, formed in 2007, recruited members of the community as well as library users. Before I began, the group consisted of 26 people. With the 18 I recruited, the total number was 44. Of these 44, seven are between 80 and 86 years of age, and the rest are from 68 to 78 years of age.

Table 1. Selected results of the survey of 200 older adults.

<b>Health status ascertained from health indicators</b>		
Good	48	24%
Fair	132	66%
Poor	20	10%
<b>Emotional health</b>		
Sad, worried, or distressed about something	94	47%
... not feeling useful	39	20%
... family problems	22	11%
... death of spouse	16	8%
... limits to health	17	9%
Frequently depressed or lacking motivation	90	45%
... nervous ailments	23	12%
... housing problems	18	9%
... financial problems	26	13%
... loss of family members	9	5%
... problems dealing with others	14	7%
Not sad or depressed	16	8%
<b>Participation</b>		
Attending cultural events	68	34%
All	200	100%

They all participate regularly in aspects of the Program for Promotion and Prevention among Older Adults. Some examples include the following: "Exercise your Mind," a gathering where they do memory activities for improved mental health; "Living Fully," where important topics are debated and which is focused on how to face this complex and difficult stage of life; "Meeting with the Past," a gathering in which they enjoy songs from their youth, tell their stories, and in which some dance and recite poetry; "How to Enjoy Good Health as an Older Adult," which sometimes includes visiting speakers; and "Recommended Reading" and "Now We're Going to Laugh," gatherings where jokes and good stories are shared.

Activities take place every week, in such a way that each of the activity types occurs monthly. These activities are also offered twice a month at the Grandparents Home in the community, a locale separate from the library. In addition, these 18 people were persuaded to participate in the guided visits to museums that the library schedules on a monthly basis. The group exercised three times a week in the patio of our library under the direction of a physical education teacher. And it participated in dance contests and cultural activities organized by the institution. These activities included the participation of singers, poets, comedians, and local dance groups. Debates and the viewing of films, including comedy shorts, were among the activities, and laughter had its positive health effects.

Three months after these older adults joined in the social activities, I interviewed each of them and was able to confirm positive effects of the social integration on their physical and mental health. No negative effects emerged in the interviews. Here are some of their responses:

"I have achieved a significant improvement in my self-esteem after attending the cultural activities."

"With the physical exercise, I ended the monotony of my household chores."

"I've been able to put aside my long-term medications, eliminating my depressed moods."

"Using the mental exercises, I'm practicing with my memory."

"After daily exercise, my ability to work is increased, and my body feels ready to take on new tasks."

"I feel motivated and in a better mood when I attend the recreational activities."

"I put a lot into the activities at the library."

Here are some examples of the progress made by some older adults with various health problems after they joined the exercise program:

Gladys Morales and Amparo Fernández, ages 75 and 77, respectively, suffer from transitory ischemia (small strokes), and they have experienced improvement with their regular participation in the exercises. They feel less leg pain and can walk without difficulty. This is because the exercise produces better blood flow to the body and brain.

Dalia Martínez, age 67, suffered from a neurosis rooted in depression and anxiety that was caused by trauma, resulting in hospitalization and retirement. This situation kept her from enjoying life. After regularly participating in the exercise program, along with an environment of laughter and positive emotions, she no longer needs to take psychiatric medications to sleep. She received instruction in relaxation techniques at the end of the class that are applicable at other times as needed.

Homero Sanjuan, age 72, who suffers from generalized arthritis, initially had significant difficulty performing the movements requested by the instructor, presenting a noticeable lack of coordination. His current situation is clearly more satisfactory, because he is able to perform all of the movements requested of him with adequate coordination.

Lucrecia Díaz, age 76, had been dealing with type 2 diabetes mellitus for the past several years. She joined the Grandparents' Circle, and after practice with the exercises, she has felt protected from the progression of the illness. The muscle pains that often afflicted her have diminished.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on all of the information obtained, the importance of the integration of older adults in group social activities for positive physical and mental health effects has been proven. It has been demonstrated that physical exercise is essential for maintaining health and providing positive conditions for aging. It provides quality of life, because in addition to favorably impacting the various systems of the body, it has a beneficial effect on the cognitive functions of older adults. The influence of the cultural component in the quality of life for older adults has been proven, in addition to

the role that culture plays in the enjoyment of a healthy and happy old age. The role of the library in the community and the way in which a library may contribute to the achievement of a high quality of life in old age have been highlighted.

After completing this research, we can confirm that the manner in which the population ages is not completely determined by biology. It is also influenced by social circumstances and the individual's environment. As a consequence, aging is considered more and more to be a process that includes cultural and psychosocial components. For this reason, it is recommended that from a young age, new generations should be taught to understand the primary factors that contribute to the achievement of a satisfactory old age, with the inclusion of social factors so as to attain the integration of older adults in social life.

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Maricela Corvo de Armas is a researcher at the San Antonio de los Baños Municipal Library in Artemisa Province, Cuba. She earned her licentiate degree (a certification beyond the bachelor's degree) in history from the University of Havana in 1993. She also serves as associate researcher and adjunct professor at Artemisa's Centro Provincial de Cultura. Her research has represented Cuba at the American Library Association annual meeting in Toronto (2003) and at Congresses of the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions in Argentina (2004), South Korea (2006), Canada (2008), Sweden (2010), Puerto Rico (2011), France (2014), the United States (2016), and Poland (2017). She has done research on library technologies, bibliographies, history, and sociology and currently organizes cultural projects for children, young people, and elders. Ms. Corvo de Armas has been chair of ASCUBI (the Association of Cuban Librarians) in Artemisa Province since 2011. [bibliotecasab@cubarte.cult.cu](mailto:bibliotecasab@cubarte.cult.cu).